



NEWS

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INTERNATIONAL SNAKE SMUGGLERS CHARGED IN THE U.S.

A 3-year investigation by Federal agents from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service resulted in an indictment today against six individuals charged with multiple offenses of smuggling rare and endangered snakes and tortoises from Madagascar. A Federal grand jury in Orlando, Florida, returned the 16-count indictment against Frank Lehmeyer, Wolfgang Kloe, Olaf Strohmann, and Roland Werner, all of Germany; Rick Truant of Canada; and Simon Harris of South Africa.

The indictment alleges that the individuals engaged in a multi-year conspiracy and smuggled approximately 170 protected reptiles from their native habitat in Madagascar, an island off the southeast coast of Africa. The animals were secretly transported in a variety of ways through Europe, Canada, and the United States where they were sold to wildlife dealers and collectors. According to the indictment, the conspiracy included recruiting and employing couriers who repeatedly concealed snakes and tortoises in personal baggage, failed to obtain the necessary permits, and failed to declare the shipments to customs and wildlife authorities. Payment for the smuggled animals was frequently made by wire transfers of funds from Canada to the U.S. and from the U.S. to Europe.

The smuggled reptiles include the Madagascar tree boa, spider tortoise, and radiated tortoise. These species occur naturally only in their native country of Madagascar and are sought after by collectors of exotic reptiles and commercial reptile breeders. They are each protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species and Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), an international treaty, signed by more than 130 nations, designed to regulate and monitor the trade of rare plants and animals throughout the world. The radiated tortoise is also classified as endangered on the U.S. Endangered Species list. It is considered one of the most brilliant species of tortoises with a bright yellow head and high-domed black shell with yellow starburst designs.

"The United States is looked upon as a world leader in protecting not only this country's most imperiled species, but also protecting species from foreign countries. As the U.S. agency responsible for upholding this Nation's CITES obligations, we will continue to play a vital role in the fight against illegal

wildlife trade by restricting both interstate and international commerce in protected species," said Acting Director John Rogers of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The most recent smuggling attempt occurred at the Orlando International Airport August 13 when Federal officials discovered 61 Madagascar tree boas and 4 spider tortoises concealed in the personal baggage of Harris who had arrived from Germany. Kloe was arrested near Orlando 2 days later when he was identified as an alleged participant in the smuggling scheme and the intended recipient of the tree boas and spider tortoises. The reptiles were seized by the Fish and Wildlife Service and are considered evidence in this investigation. They will be cared for until the trial concludes and efforts will be made to either return the reptiles to their native country or place them in a zoological breeding facility in the United States.

Lois J. Schiffer, Assistant Attorney General for the Environment and Natural Resources Division of the Department of Justice, said, "This indictment reflects the diligent efforts of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to investigate instances of unlawful international wildlife trafficking. The indictment alleges a scheme in which a well-organized small group of people set about to pillage the wildlife resources of Madagascar purely for their own profit. The Department of Justice is committed to vigorously prosecuting those who would violate the provisions of our own laws and the international requirements of the CITES treaty."

The United States is the world's largest importer of wildlife and, in recent years, the demand for highly prized live reptiles has increased rapidly. According to the indictment, the individuals involved in the conspiracy smuggled and sold at least 94 Madagascar tree boas, 51 radiated tortoises, and 25 spider tortoises. The prices they received for the reptiles varied depending upon the availability of the species as well as the color, quality, and age of the particular animal.

The indictment includes charges of conspiracy, smuggling, violating the Endangered Species Act, violating the Lacey Act, money laundering, and attempted escape. Two of the named defendants have been arrested and are being held without bond.

An indictment is merely a formal charge that a defendant has committed a violation of Federal criminal law and every defendant is presumed innocent until and unless proven guilty.